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ABSTRACT

With the recent recognition by the Singapore government that the country's education system must change radically to meet the challenges of the new millennium, all levels of education, from primary to tertiary, in all areas, have been undergoing close scrutiny and restructuring. Three educational initiatives recently have been launched, emphasizing creative thinking, the use of information technology, and national education in all subjects. This paper looks at the incoming changes in the area of secondary and tertiary art education and examines the various, and often complex, factors for and against their successful implementation. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/BT)

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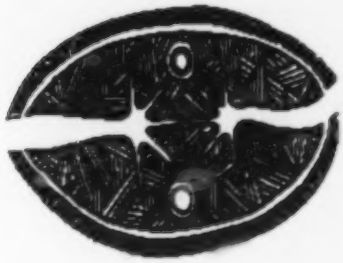

InSEA

"Recognizing the Challenges of the New Millennium: The Changing Face of Art Education in Singapore"

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RECOGNIZING THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM: THE CHANGING FACE OF ART EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract:
With the recent strong recognition by the Singapore government that the country's education system must change radically to meet the challenges of the new millennium, all levels of education, from primary to tertiary, in all areas, have been undergoing close scrutiny and restructuring. Three major educational initiatives have been recently launched, emphasizing *Creative Thinking*, the use of *Information Technology* and *National Education* in all subjects. This paper will look at the incoming changes in the area of secondary and tertiary art education and will examine the various and often complex factors for and against their successful implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese, Malays and Indians form the three main ethnic groups in Singapore. Those of Chinese origin constitute approximately 77% of the population of 3,163.5,000, with Malays 14%, Indians 7.6% and Others 1.4% (Census of Population Office, June 1998). There are also about 700,000 foreigners living and working in Singapore at present. This percentage ratio has remained remarkably consistent over the years, as can be seen if one compares the figures of 72.4 % Chinese, 13.8% Malay and 9.2 % Indian, from the 1911 census.

The social welfare, including education, of these immigrants during the colonial era tended to be a matter of indifference to the British, except where strategy or utility created a focus. Apart from limited access to English-medium schools run by the colonial government or religious missionaries, education for the mass of the population was largely funded by the racial and dialect groups themselves, with teachers and textbooks imported from the various 'homelands' (Chua 1995:111). Due to their limited resources the essential task of these schools was the inculcation of basic numeracy and a literacy centred on the transmission of religious beliefs rather than 'luxuries' such as art or music lessons.

General Structuring Factors in Singapore Education

In the period since 1959, there have been a number of strongly influential factors contributing to the structure, aims and objectives of the Singapore education system. Historically the Singapore education system in general has, until recently, been almost exclusively based on the English model, with its emphasis on pass/fail examinations as next level entry requirements. Not just the retention but the expansion of a system associated with an independent country's colonial past might seem puzzling at first glance, but, in fact, it fitted well with the ethnic Chinese majority's deep respect for the broadly similar educational tradition of the Imperial examinations as a means to social advancement (Young, 1971: 30 on Weber 1952).

Another factor is the principle of meritocracy. Integral to the Singapore government's ideology of pragmatism, it is seen as an essential factor in preventing the growth of ethnic privilege and finds its most concrete expression in the highly competitive examination system (Hill and Lian,

op.cit.247). Meritocracy operates on the premise that equality of opportunity resides in all children having equal access to a free place in a primary school, after which, genetically determined intelligence levels will, through the agency of examinations in core subjects, naturally separate them into different streams where they will receive forms of training/education appropriate to their contributing most productively to an economically vigorous society.

The combination of these two factors in the historical context of the majority of the population being 'originally from largely immigrant communities without established intellectual traditions' (Chua, op.cit: p112) has led to the development and maintenance of highly instrumental attitudes to education. Where examination success is more often than not the prime motivator in education, even at the primary level, only that which appears on the examination syllabus is regarded as important, the absorption of any intrinsic merit it might possess frequently being a lesser consideration'. This process of the 'certification of the self' ends in self-worth being measured through the number of educational certificates in one's possession' (ibid: p112). Apart from the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination) which filters off pupils into various levels of secondary school (Independent, Special Assistance Plan (SAP), Autonomous, Neighbourhood) and various streams within those schools (Special, Express, Normal, Normal Technical), the examinations at secondary level, the 'N' (equivalent to CSE), 'O' and 'A" levels are run by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate in partnership with the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE).

Past, Present, Future

Senior Minister of State for Health and Education, Dr Aline Wong (Wong, 1999, p1) has characterised the evolution of Singapore education since 1959 as being categorised into two main phases. Between 1959 - 1978, the focus was on providing education to support economic growth and national development, hence the emphasis on mass education and bilingualism. In 1979 the, the New Education System was introduced following the Goh Report (1978). The new system focused on continuously improving quality and efficiency, part of which was to reduce educational wastage. This phase has produced a highly efficient but over-narrowly examination-focused education system that is showing its manifest limitations in the rapidly changing circumstances of globalization.

The third phase is now beginning. The intention is to reposition the education system to prepare Singapore's students and workers for the knowledge based economy, with, at the same time, a philosophical shift towards an ability-driven paradigm, as compared to the efficiency-driven paradigm of the 80s and 90s (Wong, ibid.)

The new general paradigm for Singapore education was embodied in Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's call for "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" in his opening address to the 7th International Conference on Thinking held in Singapore in June 1997. He put it this way (Goh, 2 June 1997):

> We have to prepare ourselves for a bracing future - a future of intense (global) competition and shifting competitive advantages, a future where technologies and concepts are replaced at an increasing pace and a future of changing values. Education and training are central to how nations will fare in this future

His speech signalled a radically new direction for Singapore's educational goals and communicated its intention to meet the challenge of the transition to the "knowledge-intensive world of the 21st century" (Teo, 24 Jan 1998, p1). PM Goh noted that education and training are central to a nation's survival and prosperity. As it is difficult to foresee the problems brought about by new circumstances, the next generation would have to be able to think of solutions to any problems they would face. In addition, with the rapid advancement of knowledge and technology, education must provide the young with core knowledge and the skills of accessing, using and creating knowledge to build future learning. Education must also instil in students the habit of life-long learning (Goh, 2 June 1997, The Straits Times, pp1, 3).

As Professor Leo Tan, Director of the National Institute of Education, said in a recent speech "...the workforce of the 21st century will require creative and critical thinkers, change-adept individuals, innovative and science/technology savvy workers and life-long learners...Globalisation poses new economic challenges...the power of information and communications technology has already begun to and will continue to dramatically alter the workplace". He quoted the Director-

General of Education, Mr Wee Heng Tin's broad description of how the curriculum needs to be revised:

> Reduction of content in each subject, with emphasis on broad-based learning at the earlier stages and greater depth and specialisation at the higher stages of education;
>
> Emphasis on the joy of learning and development of habits of continual learning;
>
> Development of skills for higher order thinking, effective communication and teamwork at all levels, and incorporation of National Education themes and the use of information technology in the curriculum.

And additionally:

> For the curriculum to succeed changes must be systematic; they cannot be piecemeal efforts independent of one another. Such major changes to the curriculum must be accompanied by adjustments in other areas in the context of teaching and learning. Teaching strategies will shift emphasis from teacher to learner, classroom cultures will change and our assessment and examination system will be transformed. Modifications to teacher training and ultimately, school appraisal will support the change in focus.

To kick-start this process the government has allocated $2 billion to provide every school with sufficient computing power as well as reducing curriculum content in all subjects by up to 30%.
In response to the new challenges the Ministry of Education (MOE) has launched three major initiatives, Creativity, Information Technology (IT), National Education (NE). As explained by the Minister for Education, Rear-Admiral (NS) Teo Chee Hean (August 1998, p1), Creative Thinking skills enable students to find fulfilling and rewarding careers in a knowledge-based economy. National Education instils a sense of local identity as a counterbalance to globalisation, while Information Technology is a tool that provides access to knowledge and information.
The Singapore Ministry of Education has also been undertaking an extensive review of curricula across all subjects and levels in order to better create the conditions for fostering greater creativity. The challenge is seen as balancing the acquisition of core knowledge with opportunities for students to exercise greater personal creativity. As an interim measure, most subject syllabus are being reduced by 10-30% to free up time for more independent investigation, collaborative learning and developing process skills (Teo, 24 January 1998, p3) (Wong, (9 May 1998, p2). The Senior Minister of State for Education, Dr Aline Wong, emphasised that teachers are the key to the success of these new policy initiatives (Wong, 9 May 1998, pp 2, 5).
Under the concept 'Thinking Schools', as announced by PM Goh (2 June 1997, p3), more autonomy was to be given to the schools so that teachers and principals can devise their own solutions to problems. Schools will also provide feedback about the success or otherwise of implemented policies. In addition, the concept of the 'school cluster' has been introduced, where five to seven schools are grouped together to enhance the pooling of and sharing of resources and expertise (Tan, 12 February 1998, p3). The concept of 'Learning Nation' aims to nurture a spirit of innovation among Singaporeans, of everyone looking out for possibilities to effect improvements in his or her job (Goh, 2 June 1997, p4). Teachers will be encouraged to reflect, think and improve on their professional practice (Teo, 24 January 1998, p3). In response, MOE opened a *Teachers' Network* centre, housed centrally in a former school building, where teachers could share effective teaching strategies and learn about new developments from institutions and teachers world-wide, thus facilitating the accumulation of the corporate knowledge of the teaching profession and providing support for teachers to build up their individual knowledge, overcome difficulties and solve problems (Teo, 30 April 1998, p2) (Wong, 9 May 1998, p4)

ART EDUCATION

In order to remedy some of the perceived deficiencies in art education in Singapore, due in some measure to its low status in the school subject hierarchy and the deployment of teachers with little

or, in some cases, no art training, a committee was set up under the then Parliamentary Secretary (Education), Ho Kah Leong. In its 1981 report the committee recommended that a revised art education programme should include design and art appreciation, including a study of local art, architecture and design work. This revised approach was to be reflected in a new 'N', 'O', and 'A' Level syllabus.

Another recommendation was that a specialist art programme, the Art Elective Programme (AEP), be set up in order to cater for the needs of more able/enthusiastic students; to develop 'well rounded' persons who would in the future exercise leadership favourable to the development of aesthetics and creativity in society, and to set a high standard for other schools to emulate (Ho, 1981). In 1984/85 the AEP was set up in four high-entry threshold schools (two SSBs and two SSGs) and one prestigious junior college, with a substantial initiatory lump sum and per capita funding thereafter. The AEP takes a similar approach to that advocated in GCSE (UK) and DBAE (USA), i.e. a creative interface between the studio and theoretical aspects of art and design located in a socio-economic and historical framework.

Present Circumstances

The AEP has succeeded admirably in the first two aims promulgated by the 1981 Ho Report but its achievement in the third aim of raising general standards by example has been somewhat more debatable. This is because each AEP centre will have an all-graduate, single-subject staff teaching well-funded, small classes of highly motivated students in elite educational institutions, whereas conditions in the general art programme (GAP) will be deficient in at least one of these conditions at any one time. In these circumstances the AEP is perceived and often resented by many General Art Programme (GAP) teachers as privileged and elitist, therefore largely irrelevant to their own conditions.

Art education does not stand apart from the mores of the general system. Whereas the content of the art syllabuses and structure of the public art examinations are, on paper, fairly open-ended, the necessity to obtain impressive examination results, coupled with large class sizes and even up to now, a big percentage of under-trained art teachers, generally lays a heavy hand on any sustained attempts at in-depth art education. There are worthy exceptions, not least in some of the less privileged schools. However the general effect on art education has been to lead to the production of 'examination art' (Efland, 1974).

It is significant that the introduction to the last revised Lower Secondary School Art Syllabus states that 'The course-work for the lower secondary level is best considered to be a preparation for more specialised training in upper secondary level' (CDIS, n.d.). Hickman (1990) describes Singaporean art education as having a 'formal, somewhat prescriptive teaching style and an emphasis on the acquisition of 'basic skills' via objective drawing'.

This predilection for the acquisition and exercise of technical skills as a measure of aesthetic achievement can be traced to two separate 'craftsman-apprentice' models, the Western late 19th c. Arts and Crafts movement, itself derived from medieval models (see above), and the ancient Asian traditions of craft training.

Future Developments

The importance of the arts and consequently art education in the schools as a means of educating the total person is gradually being recognised by the Singapore government. The government has already foreseen Singapore as a thriving regional cultural centre, with a wide programme of initiatives to promote participation in and appreciation of arts and culture, beginning in 1991 (The Straits Times, 16 December 1995). During the opening of the Singapore Art Museum in 1995, PM Goh noted the government's commitment to balance Singapore's development after the initial years of concentrating on achieving economic success. "Improvements in material well-being must be accompanied by, or at least lead to, more refined behaviour and a keener appreciation of non-economic needs" (The Straits times, 21 January 1995).

In his speech (http://www.gov.sg/mita/sgnews/samplespeech/education.htm) at the opening of the Canada-Singapore Animation Conference at Nanyang Polytechnic, on Saturday 27th February 1999, Mr Peter Chen, Senior Minister of State for Education emphasised that the knowledge-driven economy of the future no longer depends just on the ability just to produce things, it must also innovate, solve problems, create and exploit new ideas. He placed education as the corner stone for such a knowledge-based economy, saying that:

> Through education, we can mould the next generation of people to think beyond what is the obvious, encourage them to search for new ideas, coach them to explore new frontiers of knowledge, and imbue them with the habit of life-long learning

While underlining the role of Information Technology as 'the enabler for such an educational paradigm...making possible the exchange of information, testing of new ideas and exploration of knowledge (as well as helping) our students to think creatively, critically and effectively,' (ibid.) he stressed that 'creativity should not be promoted in technological fields alone (ibid.).' He continued by saying that, 'To complement a highly technological economy, we need a driving and creative arts scene. History also tells us that when arts flourish, nations also prosper, irrespective of which is cause and which is effect (ibid.).' giving this as the reason why 'the Government is actively promoting arts education amongst our people (ibid.).' He went on to mention that the Government would be providing funds for two private arts colleges in Singapore - the LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts and the Nanyang Academy of the Arts, besides having set aside valuable land for arts museums and galleries (ibid.) The raising of the two private arts colleges to polytechnic status in terms of funding and recognition of diplomas awarded is part of a larger scheme recently announced to link them with a new degree course at the National University of Singapore, when they will become part of the supply system, with the best students being able to move from a diploma to a degree level course.

The result of these innovations for art education at the secondary levels is the introduction of new syllabuses for upper secondary schools and junior colleges in year 2000. These new 'N', 'O' and 'A' level syllabuses will have a greater emphasis on coursework, extending from traditional media to installation, multimedia and creative use of IT linked with visual and cultural studies. This will be followed by a new syllabus for lower secondary in 2001 and thereafter for primary schools.

The new syllabuses take what is termed a Developmental Approach. This is similar to the methodology developed in Britain in GCSE Art, with its emphasis on tracking how an idea takes shape through research and experimentation to its final form, rather than just presenting a finished piece of work. It has similarities also with the DBAE approach developed in the USA with its emphasis on a dynamic interaction of production, art history, criticism and aesthetics. The Art Elective Programme (AEP) since the mid-1980s has already pioneered this developmental approach to art education in Singapore (see below).

The attempt to introduce this approach across the board in all secondary schools at all levels is not unproblematic. I have outlined some of the complexities of the situation regarding art education in Singapore above. Other more pragmatic issues have to do with class sizes. The official MOE line about class size is that there is no real problem with large class sizes. The high examination success rate is pointed out as proof of the strength of this argument. What is omitted from the argument is that large class sizes go with a particular teaching/learning style, i.e. the transmission model, where there is a great deal of rote learning and teacher-initiated and organized learning. This suits regurgitative examinations. However, change the aims of education from an efficiency-driven model to an ability-driven one with its emphasis on personal research and development and the examination format to a more heavily coursework-based approach and the teacher is quickly faced with extremely large management problems to do with individual attention and mentoring. The only solution, certainly in the art room, is for a reduction in class sizes. Having single-subject specialists can only enhance a reduction in class sizes as a means of promoting higher standards. That such is the case has already been proven by the success of the Art Elective Programme in nurturing young Singaporean talent. The emergence of better-trained Diploma and BA students graduating from NIE, and proposed moves towards single-subject specialists within the next few years, show promise of better days ahead for art education.

Possible problems

This situation of opportunity is also not without threat. A dilemma, which may face the Government, is how to introduce creative thinking skills, adaptability and a measure of intellectual independence while maintaining its control of individual autonomy. The problem is that creative and lateral thinking depend to quite a large extent on boundary crossing and critically analytical attitudes of mind which are (a) not very amenable to external controls, and (b), not easily

measured by norm-referenced, summative instruments exemplified in the time-constrained examination such as O and A levels, or indeed the Finals of a degree course.

For Singapore also the problems of radical change to a more efficiently flexible system are compounded by the fact that, as in Japan, another post-war meritocracy built on much older societally hierarchical foundations, education has become the basis for what is almost a new 'caste' system where the relative social worth of a person is seen in terms of the number and level of his/her educational qualifications. This may also create public resistance to too rapid or too radical change, as may the reluctance of both bureaucrats and /or teachers to negotiate and implement the full implications of innovations that could turn education through 180 degrees in a very short time.

However, the stakes are high. The wager is Singapore's continuing prosperity and growth towards maturity.

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